

# SOME ZOMBIE CONTINGENCY PLANS

by Kelly Link

Kelly Link is the author of many wonderful short stories, which have been collected in two volumes—*Stranger Things Happen* and *Magic for Beginners*—with a third, *Pretty Monsters*, due out shortly. Her short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Conjunctions*, and in anthologies such as *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, *The Dark*, *The Faery Reel*, and *Best American Short Stories*. With her husband, Gavin J. Grant, Link runs Small Beer Press and edits the zine *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. Grant and Link also co-edit (with Ellen Datlow) *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* annual. Her fiction has earned her an NEA Literature Fellowship and won a variety of awards, including the Hugo, Nebula, World Fantasy, Stoker, Tiptree, and Locus awards.

“Some Zombie Contingency Plans” first appeared in Link’s collection, *Magic for Beginners* (which, incidentally, also includes another great zombie story called “The Hortlak”). As this story illustrates, a zombie contingency plan is an important thing to have, so before we progress any further in this anthology, you should have a look at this tale so that you can stop and consider a plan of your own. In fact, you may want to think about that now; although this book is a rather weighty tome it probably wouldn’t make a very effective weapon against the living dead.

This is a story about being lost in the woods.

This guy Soap is at a party out in the suburbs. The thing you need to know about Soap is that he keeps a small framed oil painting in the trunk of his car. The painting is about the size of a paperback novel. Wherever Soap goes, this oil painting goes with him. But he leaves the painting in the trunk of his car, because you don’t walk around a party carrying a painting. People will think you’re weird.

Soap doesn’t know anyone here. He’s crashed the party, which is what he does now, when he feels lonely. On weekends, he just drives around the suburbs until he finds one of those summer twilight parties that are so big that they spill out

onto the yard.

Kids are out on the lawn of a two-story house, lying on the damp grass and drinking beer out of plastic cups. Soap has brought along a six-pack. It's the least he can do. He walks through the house, past four black guys sitting all over a couch. They're watching a football game and there's some music on the stereo. The television is on mute. Over by the TV, a white girl is dancing by herself. When she gets too close to it, the guys on the couch start complaining.

Soap finds the kitchen. There's one of those big professional ovens and a lot of expensive-looking knives stuck to a magnetic strip on the wall. It's funny, Soap thinks, how expensive stuff always looks more dangerous, and also safer, both of these things at the same time. He pokes around in the fridge and finds some pre-sliced cheese and English muffins. He grabs three slices of cheese, the muffins, and puts the beer in the fridge. There's also a couple of steaks, and so he takes one out, heats up the broiler.

A girl wanders into the kitchen. She's black and her hair goes up and up and on top are these sturdy, springy curls like little waves. Toe to top of her architectural haircut, she's as tall as Soap. She has eyes the color of iceberg lettuce. There's a heart-shaped rhinestone under one green eye. The rhinestone winks at Soap like it knows him. She's gorgeous, but Soap knows better than to fool around with girls who aren't out of high school yet, maybe. "What are you doing?" she says.

"Cooking a steak," Soap says. "Want one?"

"No," she says. "I already ate."

She sits up on the counter beside the sink and swings her legs. She's wearing a bikini top, pink shorts, and no shoes. "Who are you?" she says.

"Will," Soap says, although Will isn't his name. Soap isn't his real name, either.

"I'm Carly," she says. "You want a beer?"

"There's beer in the fridge," Will says, and Carly says, "I know there is."

Will opens and closes drawers and cabinet doors until he's found a plate, a fork and a knife, and garlic salt. He takes his steak out of the oven.

"You go to State?" Carly says. She pops off the beer top against the lip of the kitchen counter, and Will knows she's showing off.

"No," Will says. He sits down at the kitchen table and cuts off a piece of steak. He's been lonely ever since he and his friend Mike got out of prison and Mike went out to Seattle. It's nice to sit in a kitchen and talk to a girl.

"So what do you do?" Carly says. She sits down at the table, across from him. She lifts her arms up and stretches until her back cracks. She's got nice tits.

"Telemarketing," Will says, and Carly makes a face.

"That sucks," she says.

"Yeah," Will says. "No, it isn't too bad. I like talking to people. I just got out of prison." He takes another big bite of steak.

"No way," Carly says. "What did you do?"

Will chews. He swallows. "I don't want to talk about it right now."

"Okay," Carly says.

“Do you like museums?” Will says. She looks like a girl who goes to museums.

Some drunk white kid wanders into the kitchen. He says hey to Will and then he lies down on the floor with his head under Carly’s chair. “Carly, Carly, Carly,” he says. “I am so in love with you right now. You’re the most beautiful girl in the world. And you don’t even know my name. That’s hurtful.”

“Museums are okay,” Carly says. “I like concerts. Jazz. Improvisational comedy. I like stuff that isn’t the same every time you look at it.”

“How about zombies?” Will says. No more steak. He mops up meat juice with one of the muffins. Maybe he could eat another one of those steaks. The kid with his head under Carly’s chair says, “Carly? Carly? Carly? I like it when you sit on my face, Carly.”

“You mean like horror movies?” Carly says.

“The living dead,” says the kid under the chair. “The walking dead. Why do the dead walk everywhere? Why don’t they just catch the bus?”

“You still hungry?” Carly says to Will. “I could make you some cinnamon toast. Or some soup.”

“They could carpool,” the kid under the chair says. “Hey y’all, I don’t know why they call carpools *carpools*. It’s not like there are cars with swimming pools in them. Because people might drown on their way to school. What a weird word. Carpool. Carpool. Carly’s pool. There are naked people in Carly’s pool, but Carly isn’t naked in Carly’s pool.”

“Is there a phone around here?” Will says. “I was thinking I should call my dad. He’s having open-heart surgery tomorrow.”

It’s not his name, but let’s call him Soap. That’s what they called him in prison, although not for the reasons you’re thinking. When he was a kid, he’d read a book about a boy named Soap. So he didn’t mind the nickname. It was better than Oatmeal, which is what one guy ended up getting called. You don’t want to know why Oatmeal got called Oatmeal. It would put you off oatmeal.

Soap was in prison for six months. In some ways, six months isn’t a long time. You spend longer inside your mother. But six months in prison is enough time to think about things and all around you, everyone else is thinking too. It can make you go crazy, wondering what other people are thinking about. Some guys thought about their families, and other guys thought about revenge, or how they were going to get rich. Some guys took correspondence courses or fell in love because of what one of the volunteer art instructors said about one of their watercolors. Soap didn’t take an art course, but he thought about art. Art was why Soap was in prison. This sounded romantic, but really, it was just stupid.

Even before Soap and his friend Mike went to prison, Soap was sure that he’d had opinions about art, even though he hadn’t known much about art. It was the same with prison. Art and prison were the kind of things that you had opinions about, even if you didn’t know anything about them. Soap still didn’t know much about art. These were some of the things that he had known about art before prison:

He knew what he liked when he saw it. As it had turned out, he knew what he liked, even when he couldn't see it.

Museums gave him hiccups. He had hiccups a lot of the time while he was in prison too.

These were some of the things Soap figured out about art while he was in prison:

Great art came out of great suffering. Soap had gone through a lot of shit because of art.

There was a difference between art, which you just looked at, and things like soap, which you used. Even if the soap smelled so good that you didn't want to use it, only smell it. This was why people got so pissed off about art. Because you didn't eat it, and you didn't sleep on it, and you couldn't put it up your nose. A lot of people said things like "That's not art" when whatever they were talking about could clearly not have been anything else, except art.

When Soap got tired of thinking about art, he thought about zombies. He worked on his zombie contingency plan. Thinking about zombies was less tiring than thinking about art. Here's what Soap knew about zombies:

Zombies were not about sex.

Zombies were not interested in art.

Zombies weren't complicated. It wasn't like werewolves or ghosts or vampires. Vampires, for example, were the middle/upper-middle management of the supernatural world. Some people thought of vampires as rock stars, but really they were more like Martha Stewart. Vampires were prissy. They had to follow rules. They had to look good. Zombies weren't like that. You couldn't exorcise zombies. You didn't need luxury items like silver bullets or crucifixes or holy water. You just shot zombies in the head, or set fire to them, or hit them over the head really hard. There were some guys in the prison who knew about that. There were guys in the prison who knew about anything you might want to know about. There were guys who knew things that you didn't want to know. It was like a library, except it wasn't.

Zombies didn't discriminate. Everyone tasted equally good as far as zombies were concerned. And anyone could *be* a zombie. You didn't

have to be special, or good at sports, or good-looking. You didn't have to smell good, or wear the right kind of clothes, or listen to the right kind of music. You just had to be slow.

Soap liked this about zombies.

There is never just one zombie.

There was something about clowns that was worse than zombies. (Or maybe something that was the same. When you see a zombie, you want to laugh at first. When you see a clown, most people get a little nervous. There's the pallor and the cakey mortician-style makeup, the shuffling and the untidy hair. But clowns were probably malicious, and they moved fast on those little bicycles and in those little, crammed cars. Zombies weren't much of anything. They didn't carry musical instruments and they didn't care whether or not you laughed at them. You always knew what zombies wanted.) Given a choice, Soap would take zombies over clowns any day. There was a white guy in the prison who had been a clown. Nobody was sure why he was in prison.

It turned out that everyone in the prison had a zombie contingency plan, once you asked them, just like everyone in prison had a prison escape plan, only nobody talked about those. Soap tried not to dwell on escape plans, although sometimes he dreamed that he was escaping. Then the zombies would show up. They always showed up in his escape dreams. You could escape prison, but you couldn't escape zombies. This was true in Soap's dreams, just the way it was true in the movies. You couldn't get any more true than that.

According to Soap's friend Mike, who was also in prison, people worried too much about zombies and not enough about icebergs. Even though icebergs were real. Mike pointed out that icebergs were slow, like zombies. Maybe you could adapt zombie contingency plans to cope with icebergs. Mike asked Soap to start thinking about icebergs. No one else was. Somebody had to plan for icebergs, according to Mike.

Even after Soap got out of prison, when it was much too late, he still dreamed about escaping from prison.

"So whose house is this, anyway?" Will asks Carly. She's walking up the stairs in front of him. If he reached out just one hand, he could untie her bikini top. It would just fall off.

"This girl," Carly says, and proceeds to relate a long, sad story. "A friend of mine. Her parents took her to France for this bicycle tour. They're into Amway. This trip is some kind of bonus. Like, her father sold a bunch of water filters and so now everyone has to go to France and build their own bicycles. In Marseilles.

Isn't that lame? She can't even speak French. She's a Francophilophobe. She's a klutz. Her parents don't even like her. If they could have, they would have left her at home. Or maybe they'll leave her somewhere in France. Shit, would I love to see her try and ride a bike in France. She'll probably fall right over the Alps. I hate her. We were going to have this party and then she said I should go ahead and have it without her. She's really pissed off at her parents."

"Is this a bathroom?" Will says. "Hold on a minute."

He goes in and takes a piss. He flushes and when he goes to wash his hands, he sees that the people who own this house have put some chunk of fancy soap beside the sink. He sniffs the soap. Then he opens up the door. Carly is standing there talking to some Asian girl wearing a strapless dress with little shiny fake plastic flowers all over it. It's too big for her in the bust, so she's holding the front out like she's waiting for someone to come along and drop a weasel in it. Will wonders who the dress belongs to, and why this girl would want to wear an ugly dress like that, anyway.

He holds out the soap. "Smell this," he says to Carly and she does. "What does it smell like?"

"I don't know," she says. "Marmalade?"

"Lemongrass," Will says. He marches back into the bathroom and opens up the window. There's a swimming pool down there with people in it. He throws the soap out the window and some guy in the pool yells, "Hey!"

"Why'd he do that?" the girl in the hall says. Carly starts laughing.

Soap's friend Mike had a girlfriend named Jenny. Jenny never came to see Mike in prison. Soap felt bad about this.

Soap's dad was living in New Zealand and every once in a while Soap got a postcard.

Soap's mom, who lived in California out near Manhattan Beach, was too busy and too pissed off with Soap to visit him in prison. Soap's mom didn't tolerate stupidity or bad luck.

Soap's older sister, Becka, was the only family member who ever came to visit him in prison. Becka was an actress-waitress who had once been in a low-budget zombie movie. Soap had watched it once and wasn't sure which was stranger: seeing your sister naked, or seeing your naked sister get eaten by zombies. Becka was almost good looking enough to be on a reality dating show, but not funny looking or sad enough to be on one of the makeover shows. Becka was always giving notice. So then their mom would buy Becka a round-trip ticket to go visit Soap. Soap figured he was supposed to be an example to Becka: find a good job and keep it, or you'll end up in prison like your brother.

Becka might have been average in L.A., but average in L.A. is Queen of Mars in the visiting room of a federal penitentiary in North Carolina. Guys kept asking Soap when they were going to see his sister on TV.

Soap's mom owned a boutique right on Manhattan Beach. It was called Float. Becka and Soap called it Wash Your Mouth. The boutique sold soaps and

shampoos, nothing else. The soaps and shampoos were supposed to smell like food. What the soaps really smelled like were those candles that were supposed to smell like food, but which smelled instead like those air fresheners which hang from the rearview mirrors in taxis or stolen cars. Like looking behind you smells like strawberries. Like making a clean getaway smells the same as the room freshener Soap and Becka used to spray when they'd been smoking their mother's pot, before she got home.

Once when they were in high school, Soap and Becka had bought a urinal cake. It smelled like peppermint. They'd taken the urinal cake out of its packaging and put it in a fancy box with some tissue paper and a ribbon. Soap had wrapped it up and given it to their mother for Mother's Day. Told her it was a pumice soap for exfoliating feet. Soap liked soap that smelled like soap. His mom was always sending care packages of soaps that smelled like olive oil and neroli and peppermint and brown sugar and cucumber and martinis and toasted marshmallow.

You weren't supposed to have bars of soap in prison. If you put a bar of soap in a sock, you could hit somebody over the head with it. You could clobber somebody. But Becka made an arrangement with the guards in the visiting room, and the guards in the visiting room made an arrangement with the guards in charge of the mailroom. Soap gave out his mother's soaps to everyone in prison. Whoever wanted them. It turned out everyone wanted soap that smelled like food: social workers and prison guards and drug dealers and murderers and even people who hadn't been able to afford good lawyers. No wonder his mom's boutique did so well.

While Soap was in prison, Becka kept Soap's painting for him. Sometimes he asked and she brought it with her when she came to visit. He made her promise not to give it to their mother, not to pawn it for rent money, to keep it under her bed where it would be safe as long as her roommate's cat didn't sneak in. Becka promised that if there were a fire or an earthquake, she'd rescue the painting first. Even before she rescued her roommate or her roommate's cat.

Carly takes Will into a bedroom. There's a big painting of a flower garden, and under the painting is a king-sized bed with dresses lying all over it. There are dresses on the floor. "Go ahead and call your dad," Carly says. "I'll come back in a while with some more beer. You want another beer?"

"Why not?" Will says. He waits until she leaves the room and then he calls his dad. When his dad picks up the phone, he says, "Hey, Dad, how's it going?"

"Junior!" his dad says. "How's it going?"

"Did I wake you up? What time is it there?" Junior says.

"Doesn't matter," his dad says. "I was working on a jigsaw puzzle. No picture on the box. I think it's lemurs. Or maybe binturongs."

"Not much," Junior says. "Staying out of trouble."

"Super," his dad says. "That's super."

"I was thinking about that thing we talked about. About how I could come

visit you sometime?" Junior says.

"Sure," his dad says. His dad is always enthusiastic about Junior's ideas. "Hey, that would be great. Get out of that fucking country while you still can. Come visit your old dad. We could do father-son stuff. Go bungee jumping."

The girl in the plastic flower dress marches into the bedroom. She takes the dress off and drops it on the bed. She goes into the closet and comes out again holding a dress made out of black and purple feathers. It looks like something a dancer in Las Vegas might wear when she got off work.

"Some girl just came in and took off all her clothes," Junior says to his dad.

"Well you give her my best," his dad says, and hangs up.

"My dad says hello," Junior says to the naked girl. Then he says, "My dad and I have a question for you. Do you ever worry about zombies? Do you have a zombie contingency plan?"

The girl just smiles like she thinks that's a good question. She puts the new dress on. She walks out. Will calls his sister, but Becka isn't answering her cell phone. So Will picks up all the dresses and goes into the closet. He hangs them up. People clean up after themselves. Zombies don't.

In Will's opinion, zombies are attracted to suburbs the way that tornadoes are attracted to trailer parks. Maybe it's all the windows. Maybe houses in suburbs have too many windows and that's what drives zombies nuts.

If the zombies showed up tonight, Will would barricade the bedroom door with the heavy oak dresser. Will will let the naked girl come in first. Carly too. The three of them will make a rope by tying all those dresses together and escape through the window. Maybe they could make wings out of that feather dress and fly away. Will could be the Bird Man of Suburbitraz.

Will looks under the bed, just to make sure there are no zombies or suitcases or that drunk guy from downstairs under there.

There's a little black kid in Superman pajamas curled up asleep under the bed.

When Becka was a kid, she kept a suitcase under the bed. The suitcase was full of things that were to be rescued in case of an earthquake or a fire or murderers. The suitcase's secondary function was using up some of the dangerous, dark space under the bed which might otherwise have been inhabited by monsters or dead people. Here be suitcases. In the suitcase, Becka kept a candle shaped like a dragon, which she'd bought at the mall with some birthday money and then couldn't bear to use as a candle; a little ceramic dog; some favorite stuffed animals; their mother's charm bracelet; a photo album; *Black Beauty* and a whole lot of other horse books. Every once in a while Becka and her little brother would drag the suitcase back out from under the bed and sort through it. Becka would take things out and put other things in. Her little brother always felt happy and safe when he helped Becka do this. When things got bad, you would rescue what you could.

Modern art is a waste of time. When the zombies show up, you can't worry about art. Art is for people who aren't worried about zombies. Besides zombies and icebergs, there are other things that Soap has been thinking about. Tsunamis, earthquakes, Nazi dentists, killer bees, army ants, black plague, old people, divorce lawyers, sorority girls, Jimmy Carter, giant squids, rabid foxes, strange dogs, news anchors, child actors, fascists, narcissists, psychologists, ax murderers, unrequited love, footnotes, zeppelins, the Holy Ghost, Catholic priests, John Lennon, chemistry teachers, redheaded men with British accents, librarians, spiders, nature books with photographs of spiders in them, darkness, teachers, swimming pools, smart girls, pretty girls, rich girls, angry girls, tall girls, nice girls, girls with superpowers, giant lizards, blind dates who turn out to have narcolepsy, angry monkeys, feminine hygiene commercials, sitcoms about aliens, things under the bed, contact lenses, ninjas, performance artists, mummies, spontaneous combustion. Soap has been afraid of all of these things at one time or another. Ever since he went to prison, he's realized that he doesn't have to be afraid. All he has to do is come up with a plan. Be prepared. It's just like the Boy Scouts, except you have to be even more prepared. You have to prepare for everything that the Boy Scouts didn't prepare you for, which is pretty much everything.

Soap is a waste of time too. What good is soap in a zombie situation? Soap sometimes imagines himself trapped in his mother's soap boutique. Zombies are coming out of the surf, dripping wet, hellishly hungry, always so fucking slow, shuffling hopelessly up through the sand of Manhattan Beach. Soap has barricaded himself in Float with his mother and some blond Japanese tourists with surfboards. "Do something, sweetheart!" his mother implores. So Sweetheart throws water all over the floor. There's the surfboards, a baseball bat under the counter, some rolls of quarters, and a swordfish mounted up on the wall, but Sweetheart decides the cash register is best for bashing. He tells the Japanese tourists to get down on their hands and knees and rub soap all over the floor. When the zombies finally find a way into Float, his mother and the tourists can hide behind the counter. The zombies will slip all over the floor and Sweetheart will bash them in the head with the cash register. It will be just like a Busby Berkeley zombie musical.

"What's going on?" Carly says. "How's your father doing?"

"He's fine," Will says. "Except for the open-heart surgery thing. Except for that, he's good. I was just looking under the bed. There's a little kid under there."

"Oh," Carly says. "Him. That's the little brother. Of my friend. *Le bro de mon ami*. I'm taking care of him. He likes to sleep under the bed."

"What's his name?" Will says.

"Leo," Carly says. She hands Will a beer and sits down on the bed beside him. "So tell me about this prison thing. What did you do? Should I be afraid of you?"

"Probably not," Will says. "It doesn't do much good to be afraid of things."

“So tell me what you did,” Carly says. She burps so loud that Will is amazed that the kid under the bed doesn’t wake up. Leo.

“This is a great party,” Will says. “Thanks for hanging out with me.”

“Somebody just puked out of a window in the living room. Someone else almost threw up in the swimming pool, but I got them out in time. If someone throws up on the piano, I’m in big trouble. You can’t get puke out from between piano keys.”

Will thinks Carly says this like she knows what she’s talking about. There are girls who have had years of piano lessons, and then there are girls who have taken piano lessons who also know how to throw a party and how to clean throw-up out of a piano. There’s something sexy about a girl who knows how to play the piano, and keys that stick for no apparent reason. Will doesn’t have any zombie contingency plans that involve pianos, and it makes him sick. How could he have forgotten pianos?

“I’ll help you clean up,” Will says. “If you want.”

“You don’t have to try so hard, you know,” Carly says. She stares right at him, like there’s a spider on his face or an interesting tattoo, some word spelled upside down in a foreign language that she wants to understand. Will doesn’t have any tattoos. As far as he’s concerned, tattoos are like art, only worse.

Will stares right back. He says, “When I was at this party outside Kansas City, I heard this story about a kid who threw a lot of parties while his parents were on vacation. Right before they got home, he realized how fucked up the house was, and so he burned it down.” This story always makes Will laugh. What a dumb kid.

“You want to help me burn down my friend’s house?” Carly says. She smiles, like, what a good joke. What a nice guy he is. “What time is it? Two? If it’s two in the morning, then you have to tell me why you went to prison. It’s like a rule. We’ve known each other for at least an hour, and it’s late at night and I still don’t know why you were in prison, even though I can tell you want to tell me or otherwise you wouldn’t have told me you were in prison in the first place. Was what you did that bad?”

“No,” Will says. “It was just really stupid.”

“Stupid is good,” Carly says. “Come on. Pretty please.”

She pulls back the cover on the bed and crawls under it, pulls the sheets up to her chin. Good night, Carly. Good night, Carly’s gorgeous tits.

It was so small and it was so far away, even when you looked at it up close. Soap said it was trees. A wood. Mike said it was a painting of an iceberg.

When Soap thinks about the zombies, he thinks about how there’s nowhere you can go that the zombies won’t find you. Even the fairy tales that Becka used to read to him. Ali Baba and the Forty Zombies. Open Zombie. Snow White and the Seven Tiny Zombies.

Any place Will thinks of, the zombies will eventually get there too. He pictures

all of these places as paintings in a gallery, because as long as a place is just a painting, it's a safe place. Landscapes with frames around them, to keep the landscapes from leaking out. To keep the zombies from getting in. A ski resort in summer, all those lonely gondolas. An oil rig on a sea at night. The Museum of Natural History. The Playboy mansion. The Eiffel Tower. The Matterhorn. David Letterman's house. Buckingham Palace. A bowling alley. A Laundromat. He puts himself in the painting of the flower garden that's hanging above the bed where he and Carly are sitting, and it's sunny and warm and safe and beautiful. But once he puts himself into the painting, the zombies show up just like they always do. The space station. New Zealand. He bets his dad thinks he's safe from zombies in New Zealand, because it's an island. His dad is an idiot.

People paint trees all the time. All kinds of trees. Art is supposed to be about things like trees. Or icebergs, although there are more paintings of trees than there are paintings of icebergs, so Mike doesn't know what he's talking about.

"I wasn't in prison for very long," Soap says. "What Mike and I did wasn't really that bad. We didn't hurt anybody."

"You don't look like a bad guy," Carly says. And when Soap looks at Carly, she looks like a nice kid. A nice girl with nice tits. But Soap knows you can't tell by looking.

Soap and Mike were going to be rich once they got out of college. The two of them had it all figured out. They were going to have an excellent website, just as soon as they figured out what it was going to be about, and what to call it. While they were in prison, they decided this website would have been about zombies. That would have been fucking awesome.

Hungryzombie.com, lonelyzombie.com, nakedzombie.com, soyomarriedazombie.com, zombiecontingencyplan.com, dotcomofthewalkingdead.com were just a few of the names they came up with. In Will's opinion, people will go anywhere if there's a zombie involved.

Cool people would have gone to the site and hooked up. People would have talked about old horror movies, or about their horrible temp jobs. There would have been comics and concerts. There would have been advertising, sponsors, movie deals. Soap would have been able to afford art. He would have bought Picassos and Vermeers and original comic book art. He would have bought drinks for women. Beautiful, bisexual, bionic women with unpronounceable names and weird habits in bed.

Only by the time Soap and Mike and the rest of their friends got out of school, all of that was already over. Nobody cared if you had a website. Everybody already had websites. No one was going to give you money.

There were lots of guys who knew how to do what Soap and Mike knew how to do. It turned out that Mike's and Soap's parents had paid a lot of money for them to learn how to do things that everyone could already do.

Mike had a girlfriend named Jenny. Soap liked Jenny because she teased him, but Jenny really isn't important to this story. She wasn't ever going to fall in love with Soap, and Soap knew it. What matters is that Jenny worked in a museum, and so Soap and Mike started going to museum events, because you got Brie on crackers and wine and martinis. Free food. All you had to do was wear a suit and listen to people talk about art and mortgages and their children. There would be a lot of older women who reminded Soap of his mother, and it was clear that Soap reminded these women of their sons. What was never clear was whether these women were flirting with him, or whether they wanted his advice about something that even they couldn't put their finger on.

One morning, in prison, Soap woke up and realized that the opportunity had been there and he'd never even seen it. He and Mike, they could have started a website for older upper-middle-class women with strong work ethics and confused, resentful grown-up children with bachelor degrees and no jobs. That was better than zombies. They could even have done some good.

"Okay," Will says. "I'll tell you why I went to prison. But first you have to tell me what you'd do if zombies showed up at your party. Tonight. I ask everyone this. Everyone has a zombie contingency plan."

"You mean like with colleges, just in case you don't get into your first choice?" Carly says. She holds an eyelid open, puts her finger to her eyeball, and pops out a contact lens. She puts it on the table beside the bed. She doesn't take the other lens out. Maybe that eye isn't scratchy. "So my eyes aren't actually green. The breasts are real, by the way. I don't watch a lot of horror movies. They give me nightmares. Leo likes that stuff."

Will sits on the other side of the bed and watches her. She's thinking about it. Maybe she likes how the world looks through one green contact lens. "My parents keep a gun in the fridge. I guess I'd go get it and shoot the zombies? Or maybe I'd hide in my mom's closet? Behind all her shoes and stuff? I'd cry a lot. I'd scream for help. I'd call the police."

"Okay," Will says. "I was just wondering. What about your brother? How would you protect him?"

Carly yawns like she isn't impressed at all, but Will can see she's impressed. It's just that she's sleepy, too. "Smart Will. You knew this was my house all along. You knew Leo was my brother. Am I such a bad liar?"

"Yeah," Will says. "There's a picture of you and Leo over on your parents' dresser."

"Okay," Carly says. "This is my parents' bedroom. They're in France building bicycles, and they left me and they left Leo here. So I threw a party. Serves them right if someone burns their house down."

"I feel like we've known each other for a long time," Will says. "Even though we just met. For example, I knew your eyes weren't really green."

"We don't really know each other very well," Carly says. But she says it in a friendly way. "I keep trying to get to know you better. I bet you didn't know that

I want to be president someday.”

“I bet you didn’t know that I think about icebergs a lot, although not as much as I think about zombies,” Will says.

“I’d like to go live on an iceberg,” Carly says. “And I’d like to be president too. Maybe I could do both. I could be the first black woman president who lives on an iceberg.”

“I’d vote for you,” Will says.

“Will,” Carly says. “Don’t you want to get under the covers with me? Are you intimidated by the fact that I’m going to be president someday? Are you intimidated by competent, successful women?”

Will says, “Do you want to fool around or do you want me to tell how I ended up in prison? Door A or Door B. I’m a really good kisser, but Leo is asleep under the bed. Your brother.” Jenny and Mike used to go off and kiss in the museum where Jenny worked, but Soap never kissed Jenny. Once, in college, Soap kissed Mike. They were both drunk. Men kissed men in prison. White men made out with black men. Becca used to make out with her boyfriends out on the beach while her brother hid in the dunes and watched. In the zombie movie, a zombie ate Becca’s lips. You don’t ever want to kiss a zombie.

“He’s a heavy sleeper,” Carly says. “Maybe you should just tell me what you did and we can go from there.”

Soap and Mike and a couple of their friends were at one of the parties at the little private museum where Jenny worked. They drank a lot of wine and they didn’t eat much except some olives. Jenny was busy and so Soap and Mike and their friends left the gallery where the wine and cheese were laid out, where the docents and the rich people were getting to know each other, and wandered out into the rest of the museum. They got farther and farther away from Jenny’s event, but nobody told them to come back and nobody showed up and asked them what they were doing. The other galleries were dark and so somebody dared Mike to go in one of them. They wanted to see if an alarm would go off. Mike did and the alarm didn’t.

Next Soap went into the gallery. His name wasn’t Soap then. His name was Arthur, but everybody called him Art. Ha ha. You couldn’t see anything in the gallery. Art felt stupid just standing there, so he put his hands straight out in front of him in the darkness and walked forward until his fingers touched a wall. He kept his fingers on the wall and walked around the room. Every now and then his fingers would touch a frame and he’d move his hand up and down and along the frame to see how big the painting was. He walked all the way around the room until he was at the door again.

Then somebody else went in, it was Markson who went in, and when Markson came out, he was holding a painting in his arms. It was about three feet by three feet. A painting of a ship with a lot of masts and sails. Lots of little dabs of blue. Little people on the deck of the ship, looking busy.

“Holy shit,” Mike said. “Markson, what did you just do?”

You have to understand that Markson was an idiot. Everyone knew that. Right then he was a drunk idiot, but everyone else was drunk too.

"I just wanted to see what it looked like," Markson said. "I didn't think it would be so heavy." He put the painting down against the wall.

No alarms were going off. The gallery on the other side of the hall was dark too. So they made it a game. Everyone went into one of the galleries and walked around and chose a painting. Then you came out again and saw what you had. Someone got a Seurat. Someone had a Mary Cassatt. Someone else had a Winslow Homer. There were a lot of paintings by artists whom none of them knew. So those didn't count. Art went back into the first gallery. This time he was slow. There were already some gaps on the gallery wall. He put his ear up against some of the paintings. He felt that he was listening for something, only he didn't know what.

He chose a very small painting. When he got it out into the hall, he saw it was an oil painting. A blobby blue-green mass that might have been water or a person or it might have been trees. Woods from very far away. Something slow and far away. He couldn't read the artist's signature.

Mike was in the other gallery. When he came out with a painting, the painting turned out to be a Picasso. Some sad-looking freaky woman and her sad-looking freaky dog. Everyone agreed that Mike had won. Then that idiot Markson said, "I bet you can't walk out of here with that Picasso."

Sometimes when he's in houses that don't belong to him, Soap feels bad. He shouldn't be where he is. He doesn't belong anywhere. Nobody really knows him. If they did, they wouldn't like him. Everyone always seems happier than Soap, and as if they know something that Soap doesn't. He tells himself that things will be different when the zombies show up.

"You guys stole a Picasso?" Carly says.

"It was a minor Picasso. Hardly a Picasso at all. We weren't really stealing it," Will says. "We just thought it would be funny to smuggle it out of Jenny's museum and see how far we got with it. We just walked out of the museum and nobody stopped us. We put the Picasso in the car and drove back to our apartment. I took that little painting too, just so the Picasso would have company. And because I wanted to spend some more time looking at it. I put it under my coat, under one arm, while the other guys were helping Mike get past the party without being seen. We hung the Picasso in the living room when we got back and I put the little painting in my bedroom. We were still drunk when the police showed up. Jenny lost her job. We went to prison. Markson and the other guys had to do community service."

He stops talking. Carly takes his hand. She squeezes it. She says, "That's the weirdest story I've ever heard. Why is it that everything is so much sadder and funnier and so much more true when you're drunk?"

"I haven't told you the weird part yet," Will says. He can't tell her the weirdest

part of the story, although maybe he can try to show her.

“Did I tell you that I used to be on my school’s debate team?” Carly says. “That’s the weirdest thing about me. I like getting in arguments. The boy with his head under my chair, I kicked his ass in a debate about marijuana. I humiliated him all over the map.”

Will doesn’t use drugs anymore. It’s too much like being in a museum. It makes everything look like art, and makes everything feel like just before the zombies show up. He says, “The museum said that I hadn’t stolen the little painting from them. They said it wasn’t theirs, even when I explained the whole thing. I told the truth and everyone thought I was lying. The police asked around, just in case Mike and I had done the same thing somewhere else, at some other museum, and nobody came forward. Nobody knew the artist’s name. So finally they just gave the painting back to me. They thought I was trying to pull some scam.”

“So what happened to it?” Carly says.

“I’ve still got it. My sister kept it for me while I was in prison,” Will says. “For two years. Since I got out, I’ve been trying to find a place to ditch it. I’ve left it a couple of places, but then it turns out that I haven’t. I can’t leave it behind. No matter how hard I try. It doesn’t belong to me, but I can’t get rid of it.”

“My friend Jessica does this thing she calls shopleaving,” Carly says. “When someone gives her a hideous shirt for her birthday or if she buys a book and it’s not any good, she goes into a store and leaves the shirt on a hanger. She leaves the book on the shelf. Once she took this crazy, mean parakeet to a shoe store and put him in a shoebox. What happened to your friend? Mike?”

“He went to Seattle. He started up a website for ex-cons. He got a lot of funding. There are a lot of people out there who have been in prison. They need websites.”

“That’s nice,” Carly says. “That’s like a happy ending.”

“I’ve got the painting in the car,” Will says. “Do you want it?”

“I like van Gogh,” Carly says. “And Georgia O’Keeffe.”

“Let me go get it,” Will says. He goes downstairs before she can stop him. The guys on the couch are watching somebody’s wedding video now. He wonders what they would think if they knew Carly was upstairs in bed, waiting for him. The dancing girl is in the kitchen with the boy under the table. The girl in the dress is out on the lawn. She isn’t doing anything except maybe looking at stars. She watches Will go to his car, open the trunk, and take out the little painting. Out behind the house, Will can hear people in the pool. Will hasn’t felt this peaceful in a long time. It’s like that first slow part in a horror movie, before the bad thing happens. Will knows that sometimes you shouldn’t try to anticipate the bad thing. Sometimes you are supposed to just listen to swimmers fooling around in a pool. People you can’t see. The night and the moon and the girl in the dress. Will stands on the lawn for a while, holding the painting, wishing that Becka was here with him. Or Mike.

Will takes the painting back upstairs and into the master bedroom. He turns the lights off and wakes Carly up. She’s been crying in her sleep. “Here it is,” he says.

“Will?” Carly says. “You turned off the light. Is it the ocean? It looks like the

ocean. I can't really see anything."

"Sure you can," Will says. "There's moonlight."

"I only have one contact lens in," Carly says.

Will stands on the bed and lifts the painting of the garden off its picture hook. How can a painting of some flowers be so heavy? He leans it against the bed and hangs up the painting from the car. Iceberg, zombie, a bunch of trees. Some obscured and unknowable thing. How are you supposed to tell what it is? It makes him want to die, sometimes. "There you go," he says. "It's yours."

"It's beautiful," Carly says. Will thinks maybe she's crying again. She says, "Will? Will you just lie down with me? For a little while?"

Sometimes Soap has this dream. He isn't sure whether it's a prison dream or a dream about art or a dream about zombies. Maybe it isn't about any of those things. He dreams that he's in a dark room. Sometimes it's an enormous room, very long and narrow. Sometimes there are people in it, leaning silently up against the walls. He can only figure out if there are people or how big the room is when he stretches out his arms and walks forward. He has no idea what they're doing in the room with him. He has no idea what he's supposed to do, either. Sometimes it's a very small room. It's dark. It's dark.

"Hey, kid. Hey, Leo. Wake up, Leo. We gotta go." Soap is lying on the floor beside the bed, holding up the dust ruffle. He has to whisper. Carly is asleep on the too-big bed, under the covers.

Leo uncurls. He wriggles forward, towards Will. Then he wriggles back again, away from Will. He's maybe six or seven years old. "Who are you?" Leo says. "Where's Carly?"

"Carly sent me to get you, Leo," Soap says. "You have to be very, very quiet and do exactly what I say. There are zombies in the house. There are brain-eating zombies in the house. We have to get to a safe place. We have to go get Carly. She needs us." Leo stretches out his hand. Soap takes it and pulls him out from under the bed. He picks Leo up. Leo holds on to Will tightly. He doesn't weigh a lot, but he's so warm. Little kids have fast metabolisms.

"The zombies are chasing Carly?" Leo says.

"That's right," Soap says. "We have to go save her."

"Can I bring my robot?" Leo says.

"I've already put your robot in the car," Will says. "And your dinosaur T-shirt and your basketball."

"Are you Wolverine?" Leo says.

"That's right," Wolverine says. "I'm Wolverine. Let's get out of here."

Leo says, "Can I see your claws?"

"Not now," Wolverine says.

"I have to go to the bathroom before we go," Leo says.

"Okay," Wolverine says. "That's a great idea. I'm proud of you for telling me that."

Some things that you could try with zombies, but which won't work:

Panic.

Don't panic. Remain calm.

Call the police.

Take them out to dinner. Get them drunk.

Ask them to come back later.

Ignore them.

Take them home.

Tell them jokes. Play board games with them.

Tell them you love them.

Rescue them.

Wolverine and Leo have a backpack. They put a box of Cheerios and some bananas and Leo and Carly's parents' gun and a Game Boy and some batteries and a Ziploc bag full of twenty-dollar bills from the closet in the master bedroom in the backpack. There's a late-night horror movie on TV, but no one is there to watch it. The girl in the dress on the lawn is gone. If there's someone in the pool, they're keeping quiet.

Wolverine and Leo get in Wolverine's car and drive away.

Carly is dreaming that she's the President of the United States of America. She's living in the White House—it turns out that the White House is built out of ice. It's more like the Whitish Greenish Bluish House. Everybody wears big fur coats and when President Carly gives presidential addresses, she can see her breath. All her words hanging there. She's hanging out with rock stars and Nobel Prize winners. It's a wonderful dream. Carly's going to save the world. Everyone loves her, even her parents. Her parents are so proud of her. When she wakes up, the first thing she sees—before she sees all the other things that are missing besides the oil painting of the woods that nobody lives in, nobody painted, and nobody stole—is the empty space on the wall in the bedroom above her parents' bed.